

Handling Theology in Footnotes: Salafī Editors on *Ḥadīth* Commentaries from the Middle Period

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Abstract

A prominent genre of contemporary Salafī literature consists of critical editions of texts from the Middle Period with editorial introductions and footnotes. These editions allow Salafī editors to reinforce their views on various subjects, sometimes by criticizing the text's author. This article analyzes Salafī editors' critical engagement with medieval *ḥadīth* commentators by focusing on the problem of divine attributes in the *ḥadīth* commentary literature. It argues that Salafīs seek to rebut their opponents—particularly Ash'arī *ḥadīth* scholars—utilizing different discursive strategies. These include rejecting *mutashābih*, *majāz*, and *ta'wīl* as hermeneutical categories, re-defining the concepts of *bi-lā kayf* and *tafwīd*, and emphasizing the inconsistencies in the Ash'arī doctrine of divine attributes. Their footnotes also function to reinforce group identity and tradition, presenting Salafī Islam as the core of *ahl al-sunna*, and appealing to the Muslim public with a concrete image of God.

Keywords

Salafī Islam – Salafism – Islamic theology – *ḥadīth* commentary – divine attributes – anthropomorphism – Ibn Bāz, editorial practices

Introduction

Salafi Islam¹ has a dual approach to the past. It cherishes the first three generations' early perceptions of Islam, but subjects all of the intellectual tradition to critical investigation. This article examines how contemporary Salafi scholars critically engage with the *ḥadīth* authorities of the Middle Period² by focusing on the highly disputed theological issue of God's attributes in the *ḥadīth* commentary literature. Given that Salafis champion a *ḥadīth*-centered articulation of Islam, particularly in matters of creed, a study of their objections to revered *ḥadīth* scholars of the past provides us with a unique opportunity to better understand their reinforcement of group identity and tradition. This study examines Salafis' rhetorical strategies in their engagement with past scholarship in recent editions of medieval *ḥadīth* commentaries, an intriguing yet largely neglected literary enterprise. By analyzing their editorial footnotes, we can demonstrate how Salafi editors employ the "editor's space" made available by modern publishing practices to challenge rival theological positions.

The focus of this article is on the contemporary puritan version of Salafi Islam that has spread across the Muslim world since the latter half of the twentieth century. Somewhat distinct from modernist and jihadi currents, this puritan version, albeit appearing under different labels, is commonly characterized by a literal and unmediated reading of scripture (the Qur'ān and sound *ḥadīth*), and political quietism, along with a rejection of speculative theology (*kalām*), popular Sufism, and the blind emulation of legal

1 In preferring the term "Salafi Islam" to "Salafism", I follow Bruckmayr and Hartung, who associate the former with "aloofist"/apolitical positions, and the latter with ideology and political power structures. A few of the Salafi editors discussed in the article, however, are interested in politics, as indicated below. See Philipp Bruckmayr and Jan-Peter Hartung, "Introduction: Challenges from 'The Periphery'?—Salafi Islam Outside the Arab World. Spotlights on Wider Asia", *WI* 60:2–3 (2020), 137–69 (154). According to Wagemakers' alternative categorization of Salafis, the editors discussed in this article mainly correspond to the two sub-trends of quietist Salafis: "aloofists" and "loyalists". See Joas Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 52–54.

2 As "Middle Ages" is a controversial term in Islamic studies, I adopt Marshall Hodgson's increasingly more common "Middle Period" to refer to the tenth to sixteenth centuries of Islam. See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vol. 2. I use "medieval" as an adjective, as the standard expression used in the literature.

schools.³ While Salafī Islam is a global phenomenon espoused by various countries, Saudi Arabia has significantly contributed to its spread both by providing financial support and by fostering scholarly networks.

In his path-breaking book, *The Making of Salafism*, Henri Lauzière argued that the beginnings of this puritan Salafī current dated to no earlier than the 1920s.⁴ However, other historians have suggested that there are certain commonalities between puritan Salafī Islam and pre-modern Muslim reform movements.⁵ Since this article covers the post-World War II period, it does not directly address the academic debate on the origins of puritan Salafī Islam. Nonetheless, it sheds light on Salafis' efforts to construct identity and tradition through the discussion of divine attributes, the significance of which for them has been repeatedly emphasized in relevant studies.⁶

As the present article operates on two different levels—one addressing the problem of divine attributes and the other, the literary production of contemporary Salafis—it offers introductory remarks on both matters with reference to recent literature. My examination focuses specifically on the problem of God's attributes that have equivalents in human beings and can be attested only from scripture, known as "reported attributes" (*ṣifāt khabariyya*). The nature of the reported attributes related to God's essence and acts, such as God's face (*wajh*), hands (*yad*), descent (*nuzūl*), and advent (*majīr*), has been

3 Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2009), 257; Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 6–10; Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism: Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 30–34. The characterization above is given only for brevity. New data suggests that puritan Salafis may differ among themselves with regard to specific points in this context: See Bruckmayr and Hartung, "Salafī Islam Outside the Arab World".

4 Lauzière, *Making of Salafism*, 20–24.

5 Frank Griffel, "What Do We Mean By 'Salafi'? Connecting Muḥammad 'Abduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History", *WT* 55:2 (2015), 186–220; Itzhak Weismann, "A Perverved Balance: Modern Salafism between Reform and Jihād", *WT* 57:1 (2017), 33–66. For a good summary and assessment of this debate that produced several rejoinders, see Joas Wagemakers, "Salafism's Historical Continuity: The Reception of 'Modernist' Salafis by 'Purist' Salafis in Jordan", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30:2 (2019), 205–31. A very recent contribution is Pieter Coppens, "Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī's Treatise on Wiping over Socks and the Rise of a Distinct Salafi Method", *WT* 62:2 (2022), 154–87.

6 "For centuries, *salafī* had functioned as an infrequent but quite consistent technical term for designating Muslims who rejected speculative theology and the figurative interpretation of divine attributes—most often exponents of neo-Hanbali theology who claimed to abide by the doctrine of the ancestors (*madhhab al-salaf*)", Henri Lauzière, "Salafism against Hadith Literature: The Curious Beginnings of a New Category in 1920s Algeria", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 141:2 (2021), 403–25 (409).

fiercely debated since the early centuries of Islam because of the risk of straying into anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) and corporealism (*tajsīm*).

Stressing divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), the Mu'tazila advocated a figurative interpretation of such attributes, considering them as metaphors only. At the other end of the spectrum, the Ḥanbalīs affirmed these expressions with their apparent (*ẓāhir*) meanings without asking how (*bi-lā kayf*).⁷ Though some Ḥanbalīs, such as Abū Ya'lā (d. 458/1066) and Ibn 'Aqīl (d. 513/1119), moved relatively close to rational theology, most eschewed a figurative interpretation. Positioned between these poles, the Sunni theological schools of Ash'ariyya and Māturīdiyya adopted a moderately rational interpretation of reported attributes.⁸ Even such *ḥadīth*-oriented Ash'arī scholars as Muḥyī l-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) and Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) did not refrain from engaging in allegorical interpretations when they sensed a potential undermining of God's transcendence in the apparent meaning of scripture. In general, Ash'arī *ḥadīth* commentators neutralized problematic expressions in prophetic *ḥadīths* by utilizing hermeneutical tools.⁹

The Ash'arīs occupy a middle ground between the Mu'tazila and the Ḥanbalīs with regard to the role they ascribe to reason in theological issues. Nonetheless, the most intense rivalries took place between the latter and the Ash'arīs. The tension that escalated in the capital city, Baghdad, during the fifth

7 Ḥanbaliyya, in this article, refers to a theological doctrine generally adopted by *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* and those who are Ḥanbalī in *fiqh*. For the history and characteristics of Ḥanbalī theology, see Jon Hoover, "Ḥanbalī Theology", in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 625–46. While it is highly problematic to connect theological tendencies to certain legal affiliations, Shāfi'īs and Mālikīs are commonly associated with Ash'ariyya, whereas Transoxanian Ḥanafīs are usually associated with the Māturīdiyya. For the intricate relationship between theological doctrines and legal schools, see George Makdisi, "Ash'arī and the Ash'arites in Islamic Religious History: Parts I & II", in *Religion, Law and Learning in Classical Islam* (Hampshire: Variorum, 1991), 37–80, 19–39; Baber Johansen, *Contingency in a Sacred Law: Legal and Ethical Norms in the Muslim Fiqh* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 8, 22.

8 Nader El-Bizri, "God: Essence and attributes", in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 121–40 (121–31); Namira Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists: Theology, Power and Sunni Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 11–60. On the position of Ḥanbalīs-Wahhabīs in particular, see Aziz Al-Azmah, "Orthodoxy and Hanbalite Fideism", *Arabica* 35:3 (1988), 253–66; Binyamin Abrahamov, "The *Bi-Lā Kayfa* Doctrine and Its Foundations in Islamic Theology", *Arabica* 42:3 (1995), 365–79; Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 43; Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*, trans. Ethan S. Rundell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 73; Hoover, "Ḥanbalī Theology".

9 Livnat Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam: The Challenge of Traditionalism (700–1350)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 229–34.

century lasted for centuries, resulting in numerous scholarly confrontations and social upheavals.¹⁰ It was against this backdrop that Ash'arīs' treatment of reported attributes presented a source of profound discontent for the Ḥanbalīs.

Though recent studies plausibly question whether contemporary Salafīs' ideas on divine attributes truly conform to those of the Ḥanbaliyya of the Middle Period,¹¹ Salafī Islam was largely built on Ḥanbalīs' protest against classical Ash'arī theology, to the point of making it a hallmark of their entire doctrine.¹² Criticizing the Ash'ariyya on the issue of reported attributes is as important to Salafīs today as it was to Ḥanbalīs of the past, enabling them to assert the tenets of their creed and reinforce a group identity that is distinct from other theological schools.¹³ The first major task of the article, then, is to conduct an analysis of the Salafī critique by focusing on its argumentation, strategies, and functions.

The question of where can we find the Salafī deconstruction of medieval theology on reported attributes confronts us with the issue of contemporary Salafīs' literary production, the second contribution this article makes. Though one can trace the development of the Salafī critique through their monographs, independent works of refutation, and academic dissertations, the primary sources I have used here are modern editions of medieval *ḥadīth*

10 Merlin Swartz, *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism: Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb Akhbār aṣ-Ṣifāt: A Critical Edition of the Arabic Text* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Yasir Qadhi, "Salafī-Ash'arī Polemics of the 3rd & 4th Islamic Centuries", *MW* 106:3 (2016), 433–47; Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam*, passim; Jon Hoover, "Early Mamlūk Ash'arism against Ibn Taymiyya on the Nonliteral Reinterpretation (*ta'wīl*) of God's Attributes", in *Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West*, ed. Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 195–230.

11 Mohammad Gharaibeh, "Zur Glaubenslehre des Salafismus", *Salafismus: Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam*, ed. Behnam T. Said and Hazim Fouad, (Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 106–31.

12 Griffel identifies the "[Salafī] opposition to the strong tradition of Ash'arism" as one of their most shared concerns, see "What Do We Mean By 'Salafī'?", 219. This opposition is not confined to Ash'arīs, but extends also to the Māturīdiyya: See Philipp Bruckmayr, "Salafī Challenge and Māturīdī Response: Contemporary Disputes over the Legitimacy of Māturīdī *kalām*", *WI* 60:2–3 (2020), 293–325.

13 The following works highlight the centrality of the issue of God's reported attributes to Salafī Islam in different contexts: Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafī Thought and Action", in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 33–57 (38–41); Terje Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 159; Chanfi Ahmed, *West African 'ulamā' and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawāb al-Ifriqī—The Response of the African* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 128, 150; Lauzière, *Making of Salafism*, 241; Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists*, Ch. 6; Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism*, 28.

commentaries prepared for publication and footnoted by Salafī editors. Since much of the debate on the reported attributes revolves around the Prophet's statements, the benefits of examining the *ḥadīth* commentary literature for this study are twofold, providing clues both to how pre-modern Ash'arī commentators analyzed the related *ḥadīths* and to how contemporary Salafī editors have critically engaged with their interpretations.¹⁴ Given their aversion to classical theology texts and their abstract language, Salafīs regard *ḥadīth* commentary as one of the most suitable mediums for confronting Ash'arī theologians, particularly in editorial footnotes.

The increasing use of editorial footnotes in the booming Salafī publishing industry was made possible by the accelerated growth in the printing of *ḥadīth* commentaries in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Modern printing practices in Islamic literature provided editors with means of making Salafī scholarship more visible.¹⁵ Eager to exploit new communication channels, Salafī scholars have not only employed the “editor's space” for conventional purposes, such as demonstrating the base text's variant readings or locating its references, but also to criticize their opponents.

Western academic literature has been increasingly paying attention to the significance of printing and literary production for Salafī Islam.¹⁶ Focusing on Salafī works on *al-ʿAqīda al-ṭahāwīyya*, Wasim Shiliwala, and, to a degree,

14 For the relationship between theological commitments and *ḥadīth* commentary, see Vardit Tokatly, “The *ʿĀlām al-ḥadīth* of al-Khaṭṭābī: A Commentary on al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* or a Polemical Treatise”, *Studia Islamica* 92 (2001), 53–91; Joel Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary Across a Millennium* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 118–19, 172–74; Mustafa Macit Karagözoğlu, “Commentaries”, in *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith*, ed. Daniel W. Brown (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 159–85 (165, 172). In her rigorous analysis of *aḥādīth al-ṣifa*, Holtzman has shown how useful and relevant *ḥadīth* commentaries could be to the study of theological problems: See Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam*.

15 For the beginnings and scholarly functions of modern editorial practices in the Arabic literature, see Islam Dayeh, “From *Taṣḥīḥ* to *Taḥqīq*: Toward a History of the Arabic Critical Edition”, *Philological Encounters* 4 (2019), 245–99; Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), Chs. 5–8.

16 See, e.g., Jacob Olidort, “In Defense of Tradition: Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī and the Salafī Method” (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2016), 114–15; Ahmad Khan, “Islamic Tradition in an Age of Print: Editing, Printing and Publishing the Classical Heritage”, in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, ed. Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 52–99. Hammond provides a decent overview of global Salafī publishing activities in Andrew Hammond, “Salafī Publishing and Contestation over Orthodoxy and Leadership in Sunni Islam”, in *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam*, ed. Peter Mandaville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 76–92.

Philipp Bruckmayr have recently demonstrated the role of literary production, including commentaries, corrections, annotated/critical editions (*taʿlīqs* or *taḥqīqs*), and refutations in the Salafī construction of tradition.¹⁷ Their case studies endorse what Nabil Mouline had briefly observed of modern editions of books from the Middle Period:

In order to establish themselves as the heirs of this tradition [i.e., Hanbali cultural heritage], the ulama had to establish a clear line of descent from it and also appropriate it. This attempt to appropriate the tradition concerned not only what are regarded as its more orthodox works, but also works that conflict with the doctrines of modern Hanbali-Wahhabism. These latter have been either faithfully edited, with footnotes and critical introductions correcting what are seen as their more “unorthodox” aspects, or simply republished absent the objectionable content.¹⁸

Though several studies address the pivotal role of editors as a professional class in Salafī publishing,¹⁹ academic scholarship has yet to fully explore the footnotes inserted into new editions of pre-modern *ḥadīth* commentaries.²⁰ By examining these notes in relation to the problem of reported attributes—perhaps the most “unorthodox aspect” within the *ḥadīth* commentary literature—this article contributes to understanding a particular type of Salafī literary production that has gained recent attention from scholars.

In this paper, editorial notes are treated as a genre of scholarly activity, which includes identifiable interlocutors, strategies, and objectives. The Salafī editors’ tendency to focus on Ashʿarī figures rather than on Māturīdīs as their

For remarks on the appropriateness of both the printing press and new communication tools for Salafīs, see Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism*, 80–87.

17 Wasim Shiliwala, “Constructing a Textual Tradition: Salafī Commentaries on *al-ʿAqida al-ṭahāwīyya*,” *WI* 58:4 (2018), 461–503; Bruckmayr, “Salafī Challenge and Māturīdī Response,” 313–15. Walid A. Saleh, on the other hand, emphasizes both the significance and perils of editing classical Qurʾān commentaries for Salafīs: See “The Place of the Medieval in Qurʾān Commentary: A Survey of Recent Editions,” in *Practices of Commentary*, ed. Christina Lechtermann and Markus Stock (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2020), 45–54.

18 Mouline, *Clerics of Islam*, 45.

19 Khan traces the modern debates on the scholarly persona of Abū Ḥanīfa through the writings of “scholars-cum-editors” in “Islamic Tradition in an Age of Print”. Other studies, in addition to those cited in fn. 15, include Gualtherus H. A. Juynboll, “Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (1892–1958) and his edition of Ibn Ḥanbal’s Musnad,” *Der Islam* 49:2 (1972), 221–47; Olidort, “In Defense of Tradition,” 120–31, 193–202; Coppens, “Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī’s Treatise”.

20 For a brief observation on editorial notes in passing, see Karagözoğlu, “Commentaries,” 172.

primary rivals is perhaps due to the former being historically more preoccupied with *ḥadīth* commentary than any other group. This also explains why Salafī editors chose to appropriate the Ash‘arī legacy with modifications rather than trying to create a new sphere of influence from the beginning. Simply put, the popularity of al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, and others in *ḥadīth* scholarship/commentary is difficult for Salafīs to ignore.

In what follows, I first introduce my sample of *ḥadīth* commentaries and their editors with my remarks about them. The next section discusses the primary discursive strategies²¹ adopted by Salafī editors as part of their efforts to refute the Ash‘arīs’ interpretations. The third section takes a broader perspective by identifying and explaining the three basic functions of editorial footnotes related mainly to group identity and tradition. The concluding section briefly discusses recent changes in the Salafī strategy and provides several suggestions for the growing literature on Salafī Islam.

Salafī Editors and Their Scholarship

This case study focuses on the following six commentaries on the two most authoritative *ḥadīth* collections, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, jointly referred to as *al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (“The two sound ones”):²²

- Ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abdallāh b. Bāz:
Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), *Fatḥ al-bārī: Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 13 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, [1960]).
- Ed. Muḥyī l-Dīn Dīb Mustū et al.:
Aḥmad b. ‘Umar al-Qurṭubī (d. 656/1258), *al-Mufḥim li-mā ashkala min Talkhīṣ Kitāb Muslim*, 7 vols. (Damascus—Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr—Dār al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib, 1996).
- Ed. Yaḥyā Ismā‘īl:
al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād (d. 544/1149), *Ikmāl al-Mu‘lim bi-fawā'id Muslim*, 9 vols. (Manṣūra: Dār al-Wafā', 1998).
- Ed. Dār al-Falāḥ editorial team (headed by Khālīd al-Rabbāt):

21 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1972), 64.

22 Contrary to common practice, editor names precede the authors in the following bibliographical records to emphasize the former. Also, commentaries in the list and citations in footnotes have been ordered by their publication rather than production dates.

- Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 804/1401), *al-Tawdīh li-sharḥ al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 35 vols. (Doha: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyya, 2008).
- Ed. Abū Tamīm Yāsir b. Ibrāhīm and Abū Anas Ibrāhīm b. Saʿīd: Ibn Baṭṭāl (d. 449/1057), *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 10 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2014, 3rd ed.).
 - Ed. Māzin b. Muḥammad al-Sirsāwī: Muḥyī l-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn wa-sabīlu ṭālibih al-muḥaqqiqīn fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Abī l-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī*, 15 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Minhāj al-Qawīm, 2020).

Reflecting the high respect accorded to them, *al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* and *al-Muwattaʿa* have received the lion's share of the attention from *ḥadīth* commentary tradition.²³ Many delicate issues of theology and law have been discussed in *ḥadīth* commentaries, rendering them a rich source of knowledge on scholarly rivalries. The six above-mentioned commentaries were selected for analysis because, to a great extent, they represent the most serious commentarial efforts on related books in the Middle Period. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that Salafī editors' notes are limited to these books; on the contrary, the inclusion of editorial additions to modern editions of classical commentaries is a common practice.²⁴

The fact that the publishing houses for these works are located not just in one country but across the Muslim world is a testimony to the global character of Salafī Islam. Two of the commentaries were printed in Egypt—one by the illustrious al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya—and two others, one in Damascus and the other located in Damascus and Beirut. Apart from these long-established presses, publishers in Saudi Arabia and Qatar published only one each of the selected works, perhaps surprising in the case of Saudi Arabia, given its image as the official gatekeeper of Salafī Islam. This is probably because Saudi Arabia emerged as a significant center of Islamic printing only in the late 1990s.

23 Joel Blecher, "Ḥadīth commentary", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krāmer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_32080> (accessed 17 July 2022).

24 See, for example, editorial remarks in the following works: Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Tawshīḥ 'alā al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Riḍwān Jāmiʿ Riḍwān, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1998); Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī, *Minḥat al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Sulaymān b. Durayʿ al-ʿĀzimī, 10 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2005); al-Khaṭṭābī, *Maʿālim al-Sunan: Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Saʿd b. Najdat ʿUmar, 4 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla Nāshirūn, 2012); Mollā Gūrānī, *al-Kawthar al-jārī ilā riyāḍ aḥādīth al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muḥammad b. Riyāḍ al-Aḥmad, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1433/2012); Ibn Raslān al-Ramlī, *Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Khālid al-Rabbāt et al., 20 vols. (Fayyūm: Dār al-Falāḥ, 2016).

Notably, the publication in Qatar was state-sponsored and has a foreword by the then minister of endowments.²⁵

Two of the editors deserve particular attention for their influence and breadth of scholarship: ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abdallāh b. Bāz (d. 1999) and Māzin b. Muḥammad al-Sirsāwī. Though adding editorial remarks to texts had already been commonplace among scholars of different orientations, including Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952) and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (d. 1958), it was Ibn Bāz who popularized this practice with regard to reported attributes in *ḥadīth* commentary.²⁶ When he published Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī’s *Fath al-bārī* in 1960,²⁷ arguably the most influential commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Ibn Bāz contested Ibn Ḥajar’s views on many legal and theological topics.²⁸ For instance, while Ibn Ḥajar advocates a figurative interpretation of the *ḥadīth* “there is none who has more jealousy than Allāh”, Ibn Bāz favors a literal understanding: Although we cannot know its nature, we must accept that Allāh has jealousy that is different from that of His creatures and is worthy of His glory.²⁹ Concerning another controversial *ḥadīth*, known as the *ḥadīth al-nuzūl* (“Our Lord, the Blessed, the Superior comes down every night on the

25 Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawdīḥ*, 1:7. For the role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in funding the global Salafī publishing activities, see Hammond, “Salafī Publishing”, particularly 84–88.

26 al-Kawtharī, the vehement critic of Salafī Islam, turned his edition of Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d. 597/1201) *Dafʿ shubhat al-tashbih* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, n.d.) into a rebuttal of Salafī views on reported attributes. Conversely, Shākir, who was closely aligned to Salafī understanding of creed, reserved a few of his footnotes for promoting that approach. However, as an early example of its kind, Shākir’s interventions on this subject were rather occasional and moderate in contrast to Ibn Bāz and his followers. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir and Ḥamza Aḥmad al-Zayn, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1416/1995), 7:299, 431; al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, 5 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1356/1937), 2:308. Despite Ibn Bāz’s great admiration for Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), the latter is less likely to be a source of inspiration for the former on this specific point because al-Albānī had just begun to edit classical texts when *Fath al-bārī* was printed in 1960. His earlier pamphlets and journal essays concentrated chiefly on *ḥadīth* criticism and religious rituals such as prayer, funerals, and pilgrimage. Olidort, “In Defense of Tradition”, 169–70, 172–73. For a footnote on reported attributes in an edition of his published a year after *Fath al-bārī*, see al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ*, ed. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 3 vols. (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1380/1961), 1:386.

27 It was Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1969), the owner of the Cairene al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, who undertook the publishing of the commentary upon Ibn Bāz’s request (Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 1:3). For their correspondence during the publication process, see Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Mūsā and Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamad, *al-Rasāʾil al-mutabādala bayna al-shaykh Ibn Bāz wa-l-ʿulamāʾ* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn Khuzayma, 1328/2007), 83–127.

28 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 1:4.

29 Ibid., 2:531.

nearest heaven to us during the last third of the night...”), Ibn Hajar contends that the action of coming down should be attributed to angels ordered by God to do so. Ibn Bāz, on the other hand, believes that the *ḥadīth* should be taken on face value.³⁰ Due to his administrative and scholarly occupations, however, Ibn Bāz was not able to complete the study of *Fatḥ al-bārī*, his critical comments covering only the first three volumes, equivalent to one-fifth of the book.³¹

Ibn Bāz remained a key figure in the Saudi religious elite from the 1970s until his death.³² In addition to his official position as the president of the Islamic University of Medina and later as the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, he inspired and encouraged others to carry on his scholarly pursuits.³³ As one might expect, subsequent Salafi scholars adopted Ibn Bāz's approach to *ḥadīth* commentary. To complete what Ibn Bāz had intended to do, his long-time disciple, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Nāṣir al-Barrāk (b. 1933), offered critical remarks on Ibn Hajar upon the request of a publishing house in Riyadh. After these notes appeared—together with those of Ibn Bāz—in a new edition of *Fatḥ al-bārī*,³⁴ they were also published as a separate book, entitled *Ta’līqāt ‘alā al-mukhālafāt al-‘aqādiyya fī Fatḥ al-bārī* (“Notes on transgressions of creed in *Fatḥ al-bārī*”).³⁵ Adopting Ibn Bāz's theological perspective and writing style, Ibn al-Barrāk extends his mentor's criticism to the whole of the commentary. ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Alī al-Shubl, a Riyadh-based scholar and student of Ibn Bāz, was another influential figure who produced a mild critique of Ibn

30 Ibid., 3:30.

31 Ibid., 3:625.

32 On Ibn Bāz, see Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Nāṣir al-Sayf, *al-Muḥtadā’ wa-l-khabar li-‘ulamā’ fī al-qarn al-rābi’ ‘ashar wa-ba’d talāmīdihim*, 5 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āṣima, 1426/2005), 3:5–399; <https://binbaz.org.sa/> (accessed 27 April 2023). See also *passim* in the following works among many others in Western studies: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Natana J. De-Long Bas, “Bin Bāz”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_23796> (accessed 01 August 2022); Mouline, *Clerics of Islam*; Lauzière, *Making of Salafism*.

33 For example, al-Albānī's *al-Dhabb al-aḥmad*, a defense of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's *al-Musnad* against criticism, was written upon a request by Ibn Bāz. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *al-Dhabb al-aḥmad ‘an Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad* (Jubail: Dār al-Ṣiddīq, 1420/1999), 5–7. For another example, see Bruckmayr, “Salafi Challenge and Māturīdī Response”, 324.

34 Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 17 vols. (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayba, 1426/2005).

35 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Nāṣir al-Barrāk, *Ta’līqāt ‘alā al-mukhālafāt al-‘aqādiyya fī Fatḥ al-bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Tawḥīd, 1433/2012), 6–7.

Ḥajar, building upon his master's notes. Encouraged personally by Ibn Bāz, 'Alī al-Shubl decided to publicize his critique only after he had presented it to Ibn Bāz and received his final approval. Other senior Saudi scholars also praised the work, as is evident from the forewords in the book.³⁶ The efforts of Ibn al-Barrāk and 'Alī al-Shubl deserve the label "correction" rather than "edition", as they only "corrected" commentators' mistakes with regard to creed. Nevertheless, their polemical character, both in terms of content and language, influenced subsequent editors.

As mentioned, since the 1960s, Ibn Bāz's blunt criticism has served as an exemplary model for those involved in editing *ḥadīth* commentaries. Significant among these editors is Māzin al-Sirsāwī, a self-proclaimed Salafī scholar at Egypt's al-Azhar University. Inspired by such prominent Egyptian Salafī figures as Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī,³⁷ al-Sirsāwī belongs to the new generation of recognized Salafī editors who have taken issue with medieval Ash'arī scholars on theological issues. The bulk of al-Sirsāwī's critical apparatus, however, rests on a previous polemical work by Mashhūr b. Ḥasan Āl Salmān, who disputed al-Nawawī's (d. 676/1277) theological speculations over the *ḥadīths* of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Having embraced a Salafī understanding of creed, Mashhūr argues that al-Nawawī, who was neither rigorous nor coherent in theology, broke with the method of the *salaf* on several points.³⁸ Thus, it is no surprise that Mashhūr also penned a foreword to al-Sirsāwī's edition of al-Nawawī's commentary, praising al-Sirsāwī's critical engagement with al-Nawawī's speculations.³⁹ Unlike Ibn Bāz, al-Sirsāwī neither possesses significant official power nor plays a leading role in the global network of Salafī scholars. His significance lies in his rigorous proficiency in editing classical texts. The fact that he was able to produce the most accurate edition of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*'s most popular commentary by consulting more than 60 manuscripts worldwide renders his critical opinions authoritative in the eyes of many modern readers. Indeed, he represents a rising trend in Islamic scholarship of constructing authority through technical expertise. In a cultural atmosphere in which distinctions

36 'Alī b. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Alī al-Shubl, *al-Tanbīh 'alā al-mukhālafāt al-'aqādiyya fī Fath al-bārī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1421/2000).

37 On al-Ḥuwaynī, see Richard Gauvain, *Salafī Ritual Purity in the Presence of God* (London: Routledge, 2013), passim; Mustafa Macit Karagözoğlu, "Contested Avenues in Post-Classical Sunnī Ḥadīth Criticism: A Reading through the Lens of *al-Mughnī 'an al-ḥifẓ wa-l-kitāb*", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 29:2 (2018), 149–80 (176–77).

38 Mashhūr b. Ḥasan Āl Salmān, *al-Rudūd wa-l-ta'aqqubāt 'alā mā waqa'a li-l-Imām al-Nawawī fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim min al-ta'wīl fī al-ṣifāt wa ghayrihā min al-masā'il al-muhimmāt* (Riyadh: Dār al-Hijra, 1415/1994); idem, *al-Dalā'il al-wafīyya fī taḥqīq 'aqīdat al-Nawawī* (Amman: al-Dār al-Athariyya, 1429/2008).

39 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 1:33.

between an edition and an original study are beginning to blur, successful editors are increasingly viewed as established scholars.

The editors of the other four commentaries have distinct sociopolitical and scholarly orientations, yet have all been influenced by Salafī Islam in one way or another. The Egyptian *ḥadīth* professor Yaḥyā Ismāʿīl Ḥablūsh, for example, was associated with the Muslim Brothers.⁴⁰ Another editor, the Syrian Muḥyī l-Dīn Dīb Mustū (d. 2021), apparently saw no problem with following a particular legal school, which distinguishes him from other Salafīs, such as al-Albānī, who do not allow following a certain *madhhab*. Common to all four, however, is their explicit discontent with the interpretation of reported attributes, as observed in their highly critical remarks on *ḥadīth* commentators. The similarity of both content and stylistic preferences in these notes allows us to analyze them collectively.

Salafīs' Common Discursive Strategies

Though these Salafī editors employ diverse strategies, three of them are particularly notable for their polemics against Ash'arī *ḥadīth* commentators. These polemics reject the hermeneutical categories of *mutashābih* (verses and *ḥadīths* with ambiguous meanings), *majāz* (figurative speech), and *ta'wīl* (interpretation); re-define the concepts of *bi-lā kayf* and *tafwīd*; and highlight the alleged inconsistencies in the Ash'arī taxonomy of divine attributes.

Rejecting the Theologians' Hermeneutical Categories

Salafīs tend to reject the *mutashābih*, *majāz*, and *ta'wīl* commonly utilized by Muslim theologians in their polemical commentaries, many openly. Mashhūr Āl Salmān, for instance, identifies as the major causes for misunderstanding the divine attributes a misconception of *tafwīd* (discussed below) and the treatment of divine attributes within the general frameworks of *mutashābih* and *majāz*.⁴¹ It is, therefore, imperative to account for Salafīs' general attitude toward these concepts when examining their engagement with medieval commentators.

Salafī editors commonly reject rational interpretations of reported attributes by claiming that the great majority of Muslims have not had recourse to *ta'wīl* since the beginnings of Islam.⁴² Opposing an understanding of God's

40 https://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=يحيى_إسماعيل (accessed 27 April 2023).

41 Mashhūr Āl Salmān, *al-Rudūd wa-l-ta'āqqubāt*, 65–84.

42 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 1:102, 389; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Mufhim*, 1:424; al-Qāḍī 'Iyād, *Ikmāl*, 6:543; al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 6:431, 7:234, 14:235, 358, 374, 15:25, 259.

joy/contentment (*farah*) as His consent (*riḍā'*) in *Ikmāl al-Mu'lim*, for example, the editor Yaḥyā Ismā'īl maintains that the *salaf* affirmed this characteristic without offering any interpretation for it.⁴³ Since Salafis also tend to take *ta'wīl* as equal to *ta'ṭīl*—that is, divesting God of His attributes—they emphasize that their viewpoint is not only different from *tashbīh*, contrary to a common accusation against them, but also from *ta'ṭīl*.⁴⁴ In their view, those who interpret related characteristics ultimately negate God's attributes.

When Salafī editors have to apply and/or acknowledge some sort of reasoning regarding the apparent meaning of a *ḥadīth*, they are careful not to legitimize the concept of *ta'wīl*. In al-Sirsāwī's words, such reasoning is not to be called *ta'wīl*, but the "assigning a word to one of its possible meanings in Arabic".⁴⁵ Therefore, they present their reflections on *ḥadīth* as a legitimate linguistic endeavor, contrasting it with excessive interpretation.

Classifying the scripture into *muḥkam* (clear, well established) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous)⁴⁶ and rendering the latter into *majāz* (figurative reading) play equally important roles in the methodology of medieval *ḥadīth* commentators. Quoting al-Ghazālī, al-Nawawī maintains that "what comes [in scripture] pertaining to divine attributes falls under the rubric of *mutashābih*, when its apparent meaning gives the false impression of direction (*al-jīha*) and anthropomorphism, and thus calls for interpretation."⁴⁷ Inclusion of anthropomorphic *ḥadīths* within the *mutashābihāt* enables commentators to subject them to figurative readings. Salafis, on the other hand, deny the existence of such broad and theoretical categories, thereby rejecting their practical applications. Concerning the above-mentioned *ḥadīth*, "there is none who has more jealousy than Allāh", Ibn Ḥajar considers *majāz* the only possible solution, whereas Ibn Bāz finds it unnecessary.⁴⁸ Likewise, several *ḥadīths* explained in figurative terms in Ibn al-Mulaqqin's commentary are treated quite differently in the editor's notes.⁴⁹ In a striking example, Ibn al-Mulaqqin notes that the

43 al-Qāḍī 'Iyād, *Ikmāl*, 8:240.

44 Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 10:411. For the Salafī tendency to equate *ta'wīl* with *ta'ṭīl*, see also Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists*, 101, 108; Bruckmayr, "Salafī Challenge and Māturīdī Response", 309.

45 "Ḥaml li-lafẓ 'alā aḥad ma'ānīh fī al-'Arabīyya". al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 14:234, see also 5:79, 500.

46 Q 3:7, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali: "He it is who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical."

47 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 14:217.

48 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 2:531.

49 Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawḍīḥ*, 16:118, 17:442, 33:197, 250.

ḥadīth, “God does not grow weary till you do”, should be understood figuratively. The editor, on the other hand, disagrees with this approach by questioning the very existence of *majāz* in the Arabic language: “Know that everything that those who accept *majāz* consider *majāz* is, in the view of those who do not accept it, just a literary style (*uslūb*) among many others in the Arabic language”.⁵⁰

The Salafīs’ objective with regard to *mutashābih*, *majāz*, and *taʿwīl* is to block the theoretical means by which scholars escape from the constraints of the scripture’s apparent meanings. Just as Ashʿarī commentators employ such broad categories as *mutashābih* and *majāz* to create room for their interpretations, Salafīs close their doors to these concepts to prevent rational maneuvers. With nowhere else to go, one is forced to accept the apparent meanings of reported attributes.

(Re)defining *Bi-lā kayf* and *Tafwīd*

In discussions on the nature of reported attributes, the doctrine of *bi-lā kayf* (accepting these attributes without inquiring about their modality) is perhaps the most recurrent theme.⁵¹ The absolute understanding of reported attributes was attributed to God alone (*tafwīd*), particularly by the early pious generations of Islam (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). However, in the Middle Period, Ashʿarīs and Ḥanbalīs differed over how one should define *bi-lā kayf* and *tafwīd*.⁵² In an effort to dissociate God from human categories, Ashʿarīs claimed that it was inappropriate to attribute the apparent (*ẓāhir*) meanings of such words as “hands”, “face”, and “fingers” to God. Their *tafwīd*, therefore, involved the rejection of these words’ apparent meanings (*tafwīd al-maʿnā*) in the first place. Ḥanbalīs, on the other hand, did not generally perceive drawing on these apparent meanings as an impediment to *tafwīd*. The crux of the debate, then, is around whether one should practice *tafwīd* together with the rejection of apparent meanings, or first affirm their apparent nature (*ithbāt*) and then attribute a complete and certain understanding of them to God alone.

The great majority of Salafī editors enthusiastically embrace the concept of *tafwīd* and seek to demonstrate its consistency with *ithbāt*. They predictably accuse Ashʿarī commentators of manipulating the *tafwīd* practiced by the *salaf*.⁵³ In their view, the *salaf* never regarded the apparent meanings of attributes as inappropriate with respect to God and, consequently, they ascribed them to Him before delegating complete knowledge to God, i.e., they did not

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3:119.

⁵¹ On *bi-lā kayf*, see Abrahamov, “The *Bi-Lā Kayfa* Doctrine”.

⁵² Lauzière, *Making of Salafism*, 30, 122–23; Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam*, Ch. 4.

⁵³ al-Nawawī, *Minḥāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:204, 11:29, 15:22.

practice *tafwīḍ al-ma'nā* or *tafwīḍ al-mutakallimīn*⁵⁴ as the Ash'arīs did. For instance al-Nawawī, commenting on the *ḥadīth* "The hearts of the mankind are between two of the Compassionate's fingers", mentions that the finger in its literal sense may not have been meant, something described by the editor as an unprecedented opinion (*qawl muḥdath*).⁵⁵

In addition to defining the *tafwīḍ* to their taste, Salafīs tirelessly present the *ithbāt* as the dominant approach of the early Muslim generations to the issue of reported attributes. A great number of editorial footnotes attest to this position, typically reading as follows: "The doctrine of *ahl al-sunna* and *salaf* is the affirmation of these attributes without commenting on how."⁵⁶ One may wonder how Salafīs reconcile such anthropomorphic actions as laughing (*dihk*), descending (*nuzūl*), and coming (*majr*) with the transcendence of God. Rather than providing detailed explanations, they usually offer very brief statements, simply noting that the actions of God must be different from those of humans. These statements almost always conclude with reference to Q42:11: *Laysa ka-mithlihī shay'un wa huwa al-samī' al-baṣīr* ("There is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, All-Seeing").⁵⁷

The great majority of Salafīs advocate the happy marriage of *tafwīḍ* with *ithbāt*, but some view *tafwīḍ* negatively as the opposite of *ithbāt*. Ibn al-Barrāk, for instance, defines *tafwīḍ* as "turning away from understanding the sacred texts, and delegating the knowledge of their meanings to God, with only a belief in their wording".⁵⁸ Though *tafwīḍ* is different in his categorization from *ta'wīl*, which amounts to interpreting the literal meaning, they ultimately result in the same flawed approach.⁵⁹ Salafīs complete this strategy by criticizing the purported contradictions of Ash'arīs' classification of divine attributes.

Highlighting Inconsistencies in the Ash'arī Taxonomy

Like Māturīdīs, Ash'arī *ḥadīth* commentators uniformly affirm seven fundamental attributes of God. These attributes, related to God's essence, include life (*ḥayāt*), knowledge (*ilm*), hearing (*sam'*), seeing (*baṣar*), power (*qudra*), speech (*kalām*), and will (*irāda*). When commentators come across *ḥadīths*

54 These two terms have proved very useful in Salafīs' strategical manoeuvres with regard to the concept of *tafwīḍ*: See, for instance, al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:204.

55 Ibid., 14:188.

56 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 1:174, 389, 3:300; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Mufhim*, 1:424, 436, 427, 7:194; al-Qāḍī 'Iyād, *Ikmāl*, 6:295, 312, 543, 7:19, 8:36, 240, 252, 316; Ibn al-Mulaqqīn, *al-Tawḍīḥ*, 23:180; Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 10:413.

57 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 1:102; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Mufhim*, 2:145, 7:390; Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:425; al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 5:328, 11:165.

58 Ibn al-Barrāk, *Ta'liqāt*, 155.

59 Ibid., 43–44, 83, 169.

with anthropomorphic associations, they tend to interpret them in relation to these seven attributes, particularly *irāda*. For Ash'arīs, therefore, God's love (*maḥabba*) refers to His will to reward,⁶⁰ whereas His turning away (*i'rāḍ*) and wrath (*ghaḍab*) refer to His will to refuse someone His mercy.⁶¹ These interpretive strategies encounter harsh criticism from Salafī editors, who, therefore, have recourse to rhetorical argumentation to expose their opponents' inconsistencies, in addition to offering constructive evidence for their own claims.

Salafīs argue that the commentators interpret anthropomorphic attributes figuratively, due to the problem of similarities with human beings, this problem existing with the seven attributes as well.⁶² The objection raised by the editor al-Sirsāwī to al-Nawawī's explanation of God's laughter (*diḥk*) is illustrative and worth quoting in full:

This interpretation is not valid. The reason why they subjected [God's] laughter to interpretation, which is its presence in worldly bodies, applies for His consent (*riḍā*), too. It has already been mentioned that the commentator interprets *riḍā* as *irāda*. (...) There is no difference between His will, consent, and laughter [in this respect]. Whoever singles out one of them for interpretation is required to interpret them all without differentiating any of them. There is no point in interpreting one of them, but not others. This would be nothing but contradiction and inconsistency.⁶³

With similar reasoning, another editor emphasizes that "the difference between God's and His creatures' being above in the sky (*'ulūw*) is like the difference between the essence of God and that of His creatures".⁶⁴ From the Salafī point of view, then, none of the *ḥadīths* on God's attributes, whether about His essence or His actions, should be interpreted because of the risk of *tashbīh*.

Salafī criticism allows them to accuse Ash'arīs of *tashbīh*, a practice whereby God's qualities are viewed as similar to creatures' physical organs before being interpreted so as to transcend this similarity, an accusation typically levied against Salafīs. Since seeking *ta'wīl*, in the Salafī view, presumes *tashbīh* in the first place, it is actually Ash'arīs who liken the characteristics of God to those

60 Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawḍīḥ*, 33:185.

61 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:23.

62 Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawḍīḥ*, 3:173, 33:185–88, 190–92; al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:23, 205.

63 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:214.

64 al-Qurṭubī, *al-Mufḥīm*, 2:145.

of human beings.⁶⁵ Thus, Salafis not only reject the major justification of *ta'wīl* but also counter Ash'arīs with the very same accusation of *tashbīh* that they themselves commonly face.

Now that we have examined the Salafis' common discursive strategies, we can discuss their functions by focusing on the following questions: What are the consequences of Salafis' critical engagement with medieval *ḥadīth* commentators? What functions do the editorial notes serve in constructing a Salafi identity and history? And what is the role of the notes with regard to Salafis' relationships with other Muslim groups?

Functions of Salafis' Discursive Strategies

Editorial notes do not merely express disagreement with commentators of the past, but also serve certain functions within the larger framework of religious movements and their relationships. Accounting for both the notes themselves and the problematics of the secondary literature on Salafi Islam, one can distinguish three primary functions: reproducing group identity and tradition, presenting Salafi Islam as the core of *ahl al-sunna*, and appealing to ordinary Muslims via a concrete image of God.

Reproducing Group Identity and Tradition

Contemporary Salafis take pains to disprove the claim that Salafi Islam is a modern invention and their editorial notes and forewords aim to prove that they are a distinct community deeply rooted in Islamic history since the earliest generations. As attempts to reproduce identity involve the perception of oneself as unique from the "others", Salafis have distinguished themselves from the institutional *madhhabs* and have instead constructed and glorified their own scholarly tradition and history.

Editing and publishing classical texts is by no means the only method of reproducing group identity and tradition, and yet it is an important one. Discussing the establishment of the sermon of necessity (*khutbat al-hāja*) as a global symbol of the Salafi identity, Alexander Thurston points out that Salafi editors attempted to "salafize" Ibn Taymiyya by adding the sermon to their

65 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 6:464. Note that Ibn Taymiyya proposed a similar argument centuries earlier, claiming that Ash'arīs fell into both likening and stripping away God's qualifications: See Hoover, "Hanbali Theology", 637.

introduction to the edition of his *al-Waṣīyya al-kubrā*.⁶⁶ Certainly, there were also more scholarly ways of tradition construction:

Another way in which the Salafī movement constructs their tradition is through appropriating texts from throughout Islamic history. This process entails the mass production of scholarship that builds on such works through commentary (*sharḥ*), emendation (*tahdhīb*), *ḥadīth* analysis (*takhrīj*), and correction (*taṣḥīḥ*). These publications simultaneously promote Salafī readings of the books in question and strengthen the movement's claim to them.⁶⁷

Editorial notes are a type of “correction” from among these methods because they simply “correct” previous *ḥadīth* commentaries. These corrections do not stand alone but appear as marginalia or glosses to *ḥadīth* works of the Middle Period. As Shiliwala indicates, this allows Salafī editors to reproduce their group identity with its distinct theological characteristics while appropriating texts from the past to create a history for Salafī Islam.

To see how Salafī editors reconstruct group identity and tradition, it is instructive to examine their references in footnotes. Unsurprisingly, the great majority of citations reference Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), whose most-cited works are *Sharḥ ḥadīth al-nuzūl* and passages from *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*,⁶⁸ as well as his student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), cited specifically for his *al-Ṣawāʾiq al-mursala ʿalā al-Jahmiyya wa-l-Muʿaṭṭila*.⁶⁹ While these sources are concerned mainly with divine attributes, Ibn Qayyim's book is also a rebuttal of *jahmī* views, as the title suggests. Given that Salafis do not regard Ashʿariyya as different from Jahmiyya on divine attributes, their drawing on this book is eminently reasonable. A survey of editors' references reveals that Salafis consult books from a relatively late period rather than the works of the third to fourth centuries after hijra, ninth to tenth centuries CE authors such as ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-Dārimī (d. 280/894) and Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311/924), whose views often parallel those of Ḥanbalī theologians. These editors prefer to draw on a later articulation of Muslim dogma crystallized in the hands of Ibn Taymiyya and others, rather than dealing with the contending visions of “pure” Islam that existed in the early formative centuries.

66 Alexander Thurston, “Coded Language Among Muslim Activists: Salafis and the Prophet's Sermon of Necessity”, *WI* 57:2 (2017), 192–222 (211).

67 Shiliwala, “Constructing a Textual Tradition”, 468.

68 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:23, 205, 5:500, 501; Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawdīḥ*, 5:258, 259, 7:196, 21:185, 30:18, 33:190–1.

69 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 3:23, 5:500, 505.

One might wonder whether contemporary Salafī figures are provided an authoritative voice in editorial remarks, particularly when considering how few references there are to them in comparison to references to the medieval scholars. Among contemporary Salafīs, Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-ʿUthaymīn⁷⁰ (d. 2001) and Mashhūr Āl Salmān,⁷¹ are cited relatively frequently in footnotes. A member of the Committee of Grand Ulama in Saudi Arabia from 1987 until his death, Ibn al-ʿUthaymīn is known for his works on Salafī creed and *ḥadīth* commentary, with a particular focus on Ibn Taymiyya's theological writings.⁷² This, again, reflects the salience Salafīs ascribe to Ibn Taymiyya and the supporting roles played by the twentieth-century Salafī luminaries in reproducing group identity and tradition.

Presenting Salafī Islam as the Core of Ahl al-sunna

The Salafī editions of *ḥadīth* commentaries were produced predominantly in the latter half of the twentieth century, when Salafīs adopted an increasingly divisive and exclusivist tone toward other Muslims.⁷³ While growing less flexible and less tolerant during this period, Salafīs also seemed eager to frame any scholarly debate through defining “true” Islam and the “ideal” Muslim. One of the main functions of editorial notes, then, is to present Salafī Islam as the only or chief constituent of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*, with the Ashʿariyya and Māturīdiyya, who comprised the majority of *ahl al-sunna* historically, marginalized or excluded entirely from mainstream Islam.

This marginalization of the Ashʿariyya is manifest when they are accused of following such heretical groups as the Jahmiyya. For example, Salafī editors label the Ashʿarī theologian Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015) a *mutajahhim* for his interpretations of reported attributes.⁷⁴ Moreover, Ibn al-Barrāk boldly argues that “Ashʿarīs must either turn to the right doctrine—i.e., the doctrine of *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*—or leave it for the doctrine of *Muʿaṭṭila* such as Jahmiyya and Muʿtazila, because they cannot be saved from their contradictions other than by one of these two things”.⁷⁵ That editors present the views of the *ahl*

70 Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawdīh*, 6:455, 33:180, 377.

71 al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 6:43; 14:49, 123, 235.

72 For Ibn al-ʿUthaymīn's position on reported attributes, see Gharaibeh, “Zur Glaubenslehre des Salafismus”.

73 Lauzière connects this change of rhetoric to the end of the threat of European imperialism, which had caused a sense of collaboration in the first half of the century, see *Making of Salafism*, 165–68.

74 Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:137, 412, see also idem, 5:167; Ibn al-Barrāk, *Taʿlīqāt*, 181; al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-muḥaddithīn*, 14:124.

75 Ibn al-Barrāk, *Taʿlīqāt*, 173.

al-kalām as contrasting with those of *ahl al-sunna* ultimately allows Salafis to portray themselves as the true representative of the latter.⁷⁶

Presenting the Ash'ariyya as equivalent to Jahmiyya and Mu'tazila has a long history. As documented in contemporary studies, Ibn Taymiyya, for instance, attempted to isolate Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs by describing them as Jahmīs on several topics, including the divine attributes and the nature of faith.⁷⁷ The Salafīs, then, seek to revive these trenchant polemics of the Middle Period.

It is not always clear whether Salafī editors consider Ash'arīs a part of the *ahl al-sunna*, but they carefully avoid the *tafkīr* of *ḥadīth* commentators and even prevent some fanatical Salafīs from doing so.⁷⁸ This apparent restraint is particularly visible in the introductory passages penned by editors to praise the commentator's general scholarship. Typically, a section entitled "His Creed" (*ʿAqīdatuh*) critically examines the commentator's theological views to caution readers against taking their scholarship at face value.⁷⁹ However, these editors also tend to acknowledge the contribution of Ash'arī scholars to the study of *ḥadīth*. In the introduction to Ibn Baṭṭāl's commentary, for example, the editors, after contrasting between Ibn Baṭṭāl and their narrow definition of *ahl al-sunna*, "excuse scholars, such as Ibn Baṭṭāl, al-Nawawī, and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, who were caught up in a *bidʿa* by which they intended to exalt the Creator and did their best."⁸⁰ Such comments also reflect the editors' desire to distance themselves from extreme Salafī groups who deem some Muslims *kuffār* over minor disagreements.

Appealing to the Muslim Public with a Concrete Image of God

In trying to answer the question, "Why have the Salafīs who have been historically marginal, become so popular today?", Bernard Haykel suggests that "the simplistic and straightforward presentation of God's attributes" has greatly contributed to the spread of the Salafī message in the modern Muslim world.⁸¹ This relates closely to the third aspect of the Salafīs' attention to God's reported

76 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fathī al-bārī*, 3:30; Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawḍīḥ*, 3:173.

77 Lav, *Radical Islam*, 37–38; Griffel, "What Do We Mean By 'Salafī'?", 193, n. 23; Bruckmayr, "Salafī Challenge and Māturīdī Response", 304, 309. See also Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam*, 320–21.

78 Mashhūr ʿĀl Salmān, *al-Rudūd wa-l-taʿaqqubāt*, 31; cf. Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists*, Ch. 5.

79 See, for example, Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *al-Tawḍīḥ*, 1:144–62; Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:13–15.

80 Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:15.

81 Bernard Haykel, Review of Namira Nahouza, *Wahhabism and the Rise of the New Salafists*, w7 60:4 (2020), 508. See also idem, "On the Nature of Salafī Thought and Action".

attributes discussed here: The consolidation of the believers around the idea of *tawḥīd*, particularly *tawḥīd al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt* (the unity of God's names and attributes). Conceptual framings expressed in terms like "God's hands" and "God's face" undeniably provide a simpler, more concrete, accessible, and mobilizing image of God for laypeople.

Reaching large portions of Muslim populations worldwide by focusing on the problem of God's attributes certainly corresponds with Salafīs' aversion to historical institutions such as the *madhāhib* as well as the elitism embedded in their very nature. While metaphorical interpretations can be highly favored among a narrow circle of theologians, Salafīs lean toward anthropomorphic descriptions that can more easily resonate with the laity. The Salafī desire to treat reported attributes at a popular level has deep historical roots in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Livnat Holtzman demonstrates that Ḥanbalī traditionalists of the Middle Period promoted and commented on *aḥādīth al-ṣifāt* in public sessions, while Ash'arī scholars disapproved of the spread of such *ḥadīths* among laymen.⁸² By reviving a medieval practice, contemporary Salafīs seek to strengthen their social base through the issue of divine attributes, although their views remain marginal among scholarly circles in most Muslim educational institutions.

The Salafīs' public appeal via a concrete image of God is ironically reminiscent of disputed practice of *rābiṭa* (lit. bond) of their Sufi rivals, in terms of its social function. Adopted principally by the Naqshbandiyya order, *rābiṭa* refers to a disciple's visualization of his master designed to sustain his connection alive to his shaykh and, ultimately, God.⁸³ A primary function of *rābiṭa* is to unite and mobilize distant disciples around the master through the envisioning of his physical qualities, particularly his "face", in his absence. Though Salafīs attack Sufi *rābiṭa* as *bid'a*, even *shirk*, they pursue similar goals by different means. After all, all religious movements must maintain the commitment and motivation of their adherents while guiding them toward their form of religiosity. This, however, requires a fuller discussion of Salafī spirituality compared to Sufi practices, in future studies.

82 Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam*, 166–70, 247–48, particularly Ch. 5.

83 On the concept and functions of *rābiṭa*, see Butrus Abu-Manneh, "Khalwa and Rābiṭa in the Khālidi Suborder", in *Naqshbandis*, ed. Marc Gaborieau, Alexandre Popovic, and Thierry Zarcone (Istanbul and Paris: Editions Isis, 1990), 289–302; Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 131–46; Ian Richard Netton, *Sufi Ritual: The Parallel Universe* (London: Curzon, 2000), 84–85; M. Brett Wilson, "Binding with a Perfect Sufi Master: Naqshbandi Defenses of *rābiṭa* from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic", *WI* 60:1 (2020), 56–78.

Conclusion

The etiquette of dealing with earlier writings has always been a contentious issue in Islamic intellectual history. As an Ash'arī-Shāfi'ī jurist, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) once grumbled that one of the corporealists (*mujas-sima*) had gone too far by omitting what the author had written about divine attributes in his copy of al-Nawawī's commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. al-Subkī considered this not only a violation of scholarly etiquette but also a grave sin.⁸⁴ Facing a similar dilemma of loyally reproducing texts while reproaching elements of them, Salafis have found a way of doing so via editorial practices such as writing critical introductions and footnotes. By employing different discursive strategies in their editorial notes, they not only confront the *ḥadīth* commentators of the Middle Period on a highly speculative issue but also seek to consolidate their group identity and tradition and wrest the title of *ahl al-sunna* from other schools of Islamic theology.

In recent decades, Salafis have expanded their enterprise by producing full commentaries on major *ḥadīth* collections. This development, which deserves its own study, has helped empower Salafis to articulate their creed more coherently and assertively by liberating them from the discursive limits of medieval texts. Their success in doing so, however, rests on whether Salafi Islam will continue to attract ordinary Muslims and maintain its political and financial patronage from Muslim states and dignitaries.

Finally, some remarks about the growing academic literature on Salafi Islam are in order. Although current scholarship agrees that Salafis endorse a *ḥadīth*-based understanding of Islam, their relationship with the classical *ḥadīth* literature is more complicated than sometimes assumed. The present article has shown that editorial notes are as important as independent books, pamphlets, and treatises in providing valuable material to the study of Salafi Islam in general and its critical engagement with *ḥadīth* commentary tradition in particular. Editorial notes illuminate which parts of this tradition Salafis approve of and which they reject. Second, despite the fact that researchers acknowledge the centrality of creed in the Salafi project, they tend to identify its distinctive qualities in immediately recognizable traits such as dress, beard, ritual ablutions, and prayers or in politically-related attitudes. This article, on the other hand, is a reminder that they may continue to focus on theological issues and

84 Tāj al-Dīn 'Abd al-Wahhāb b. 'Alī al-Subkī, *Qā'ida fī al-jarḥ wa-l-ta'dīl*, in *Arba' rasā'il fī 'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (7th ed., Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1428/2007), 54–55.

that much work is still needed to better understand the Salafī creed and its complex relationships with the theological heritage of the Middle Period.

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